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ABSTRACT

This paper provides background information on the nature of rural communities and examines factors that influence educational services for students with visual impairments in these communities. Characteristics that are most often mentioned in defining rural areas are lack of public transportation, distance from a metropolitan area, size of nearest city, density of population, and environmental features such as lack of sidewalks. Rural communities demonstrate vast differences in topography and population density, ranging from isolated Alaskan bush villages to clusters of small towns in New England. Factors that influence educational services to visually impaired rural students include: (1) difficulties in recruitment and retention of teachers; (2) isolation of teachers and related stress; (3) lack of environments appropriate to teaching mobility concepts; (4) school district efforts to meet student needs; and (5) isolation of the student with visual impairment. Rural areas may lack preservice and inservice opportunities for teachers; salaries may be low; and teachers may not be prepared for a rural environment. Technological advances such as e-mail and cellular telephone service may aid in reducing teacher isolation. Various practices are described by which rural school districts try to meet the needs of their few visually impaired students. Contains 25 references. (CDS)

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EDUCATIONAL SERVICES FOR STUDENTS WITH VISUAL IMPAIMRENT IN RURAL COMMUNITIES: MYTHS AND REALITIES.

Students with visual impairment often live in rural communities and they receive their education in these communities. In order to respond to needs of rural students with visual impairment, assumptions regarding services in rural communities need examination in light of available research. References to the challenges of educating students with visual impairment who attend school in their nonmetropolitan place of residence are common. The factors most commonly mentioned include (1) recruitment and retention of teachers, (2) isolation of teachers, (3)) availability of environments appropriate to teaching of concepts (Helge, 1986), (4) problems providing adequate time to meet needs of students (Huebner, 1985) and (5) isolation of students with visual impairment from contact with other individuals with visual impairment is an issue mentioned by teachers of students with visual impairment (Jager, 1997) but not often discussed in the literature.

First, background information regarding some myths and realities of rural areas and students with visual impairment are presented. One of the first myths concerns the nature of rural communities. In a section on rural travel in Jacobson's (1993) Orientation &Mobility (O&M) textbook, the need to teach the use of unusual clues such the tinkling of cowbells is mentioned. Agricultural and rural are sometimes used as synonymous.

Definitions of rural in the literature and in individual minds are not consistent. In a survey completed by this author (Jager, 1997), working definitions for rural and nonmetropolitan were elicited from vision service providers. Two listservs related to the field of blindness and visual impairment (OANDM@MSU.EDU, DVH-S@LISTSERV.ARIZONA.EDU) were surveyed. Seven teachers of students with visual impairment, O&M specialists, or dual certified teachers responded with seven different definitions of "rural". Definitions given by respondents included some of these variables: availability of public transportation, distance from a metropolitan area, size of nearest city in the region, density of population, and environmental features, such as, lack of sidewalks. Definitions given by professionals in response to the survey reflects the diversity of implied definitions found in the educational literature.

Rural or nonmetropolitan communities where students with visual impairment reside have heterogeneous characteristics. A frequent connotation of the term rural, is farming communities, yet less than 4% of rural lifestyles found in the United States consists of family farming (Helge, 1991). A diversity of economic bases in rural areas include tourism-resorts, small businesses, manufacturing, agricultural-related industries, timber, petroleum, fishing, military service, and subsistence economies (Stern, 1994). Economic success and demographics of rural communities change over time, for example, a revitalization occurred in some rural communities during the 1970's and economic stress increased in some communities in the 1980's (Brown, 1989). A lack of similarity among rural communities extends to topography and population density. Small communities range from isolated Alaskan bush villages, hundreds of miles apart, to the clustering of small towns in New England.

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Factors Influencing Educational Service

Recruitment and retention. Loss of trained specialists is reported to be severe with personnel turnover at 30%-50% (Helge 1981). Factors influencing turnover of staff are low salaries, geographic and climatic conditions, certification requirements, and availability of training programs. Lack of preparation for living and working in a rural area is thought to contribute to turnover of staff. A survey of administrators and special education directors in the Appalachian mountains, reveal a consensus that special education personnel recruited were not sufficiently prepared for work in rural environments. They said that if local staff could be given necessary personnel preparation, they would no longer have a retention problem. The idea being, local people are already prepared to live in rural settings. In addition to the shortage of trained staff, rural school districts struggle to retain trained staff or to hire staff for less then full-time.

Teachers who chose to work in rural areas face a number of potential issues which are raised in the practical literature available to these individuals as resources but which are frequently inaccurate, misleading, and not supported in the common literature. The individual nature of reality for rural school districts, the authentic challenges of providing adequate services can be obscured by the myths that are repeated as common knowledge.

Bina (1987) found that a major characteristic affecting job satisfaction was salary level. In 1988, rural teachers base salary averaged $4,800 less than of the average nonrural teachers (Stem, 1994). Research shows that teachers frequently leave to obtain better salaries. Salaries appear not only to affect retention but also impact recruitment.

Helge (1986) found rural areas lack preservice and inservice opportunities. Personnel preparation programs are listening to expressed needs of rural school districts and are beginning to provide support for needs of remote, nonmetropolitan areas by adding outreach personnel preparation components to their programs (Parsons, 1985, Sowell, Correa & Wardell, 1987).

Isolation and stress of teacher. Spungin and Taylor (1985) state that working as the only teacher of students with visual impairment in an area can cause one to feel isolated, unable to share problems and stressed. They suggest encouraging participation in conferences and workshops to reduce isolation. Technological advances such as use of e-mail and cellular telephone service may aid in reducing isolation. Effects of isolation on stress levels of teachers are questionable. Bina (1982) surveyed 238 teachers and did not find a significant morale difference between residential teachers and itinerant teachers. This study also found teachers in rural areas were more satisfied with their position than urban teachers.

Frequent reference is made to the distance professionals must travel between students (Bryan, 1989, Huebner, 1985). Distance to service is thought to influence frequency of direct contact with students (Bina, 1987, Brodie, 1985) and the stress level of service providers (Spungin & Taylor, 1985). In a survey of itinerant Texas teachers, Bina (1987) found driving long distances and dealing with mechanical car problems frustrated teachers. Teachers stressed the importance of being organized and prepared with alternative activities because the office was too far away to return to when schedules or lesson plans needed to be changed without warning.

Environment. References to lack of teaching environments are found in orientation and mobility literature. LaGrow and Weessies (1994) state that rural areas are characterized as having no sidewalks,

poorly defined shoulders (of roads) and an increased distance between streets, "... truly rural environments have neither (curbs or sidewalks)"(p. 174). Teaching of concepts such as residential blocks or traffic patterns and teaching of skills such as bus travel or outdoor travel with a cane is more difficult in environments referred to as "rural" in typical O&M literature.

Ability to meet student needs. The ability of rural school districts to meet the needs of students with visual impairment is questioned, based on their ability to recruit staff with appropriate skills and to provide an adequate amount of staff time to meet student needs. Historically the lack of appropriately trained staff to meet the needs of students with visual impairment has been noted (Klein, 198). Anyone reviewing job postings for teachers of students with visual impairment or O&M specialist will agree this is a difficulty not limited to rural areas.

School districts, trying to meet the needs of their few students with visual impairment may organize those services in a variety of ways. A district may hire a single qualified teacher, may join with other neighboring districts to form a cooperative, or may be divided at the state level into service regions for purposes of service delivery. The diversity found in rural communities reflects variations in methods used to provide special education services. American Council on Rural Special Education (ACRES) found over 300 variations of special education delivery systems (Helge, 1991). The organizational structure influences support, resources, and frequency of service options available to teachers of students with visual impairment. For example, Alaska uses a variety of models to serve students with visual impairment in communities within the state's border. To serve students isolated in remote communities, Brodie (198 5) describes a teacher-consultant model. Professional staff make extended visits (1-5 days) every few months. Although Brodies's article was published in 1985, this author's teaching experience in Alaska (1989-1993) found the same model continues with relatively few changes. The educational agency providing this form of service delivery is a state organized outreach program that serves students with disabilities including students with visual impairment throughout a large number of rural and remote school districts. In more populated communities, individual Alaskan school districts hire qualified teachers to serve in the more traditional itinerant model with visits of shorter duration and greater frequency.

Caseloads of rural teachers average higher than teachers serving in suburban and urban areas (Olmstead, 1995). When extensive driving time is added, severe time shortages result. A resource allocation committee of the state of Colorado is establishing guidelines to ascertain caseloads for itinerant personnel (Toelle, 1997). Teachers total hours of service (direct and indirect) required by students, travel time between destinations, and percentage of workweek needed to meet other duties involved in the position. Other duties including parent contact, supervision of support staff, inservice, report writing, evaluations, and other assigned duties, may average 25%-40% of the week. Colorado includes space on the IEP for both direct and indirect service needs. IEP documented needs are a powerful justification for increased support. In California, Olmstead (1995) found that only 16 of 56 surveyed teachers included indirect service time on the IEP and only thirteen teachers said the document reflected service needs. A majority of IEPs reflect a combination of student need and teacher availability. MacCuspie (1998) suggests that when only one teacher is available in an area assignment of specific tasks to other trained personnel under the direction of an itinerant teacher may be necessary. Some of the programs in California and Oregon hire itinerant aides to support teachers of students with visual impairment.

Bull and Ruperd (1997) advocate for increased use of community-based resources to serve students with visual impairment in rural areas. Rural communities have a variety of educational resources including regular education teachers, shared cooperative services, and volunteers from the

community. Churches and social organizations are commonly available resources along with lodges, societies, parent networks, and community businesses. Olmstead (1995) surveyed itinerant teachers of students with visual impairment in California and found that teachers frequently used other resources such as grants, personal funds, and fund-raising projects to supplement official support.

Isolation of student. Several teachers serving rural students mentioned their concern regarding isolation of their students from role models (Jager, 1997). Many programs are actively arranging opportunities for their students through summer camps, summer programs at schools for blind, and field trips for students with visual impairment. Connections are sometimes made to adults with visual impairment in the community or through Internet.

Summary

As school districts accept accountability for appropriate placement, students with visual impairment are being educated in settings that span a continuum. Historically, a student needed to attend a school for the blind to receive specialized services (Roberts, 1986). In Olin Burritt's 1916 president's address to the American Association of Instructors of Blind, he said "children who live in rural school districts should be educated in residential schools" (Goodrich & Sowell, 1996, p. 405). However, currently increased numbers of students with visual impairment are now educated outside of residential schools (Poppe, 1991) and many of these school districts are located in rural communities. Students with visual impairment are now, more commonly being educated in their local schools while living at home. The greatest challenge facing urban, suburban and rural schools is still the lack of trained staff. A few personnel preparation programs are trying to creatively change by offering distance delivery training programs, by making use of specially trained assistants, and by developing intensive, specialized, short-term training at schools for the blind.

Rural districts are addressing needs of students with visual impairment in a number of ways, many of which are similar to schools found in large urban areas (Olmstead, 1991). They may be served in regular classroom, resources rooms, and special schools. They may receive support in their classroom, pull out services, or tutoring. Services may be provided through the hiring of a single teacher, cooperative sharing of a teacher/teachers (sometimes called a regional program), placement in a residential school or through outreach programs (Spungin & Taylor,1995). Although there are many similarities with urban districts, differences need to be considered in order to ensure effective services. As professionals we need to focus on adapting our service delivery to meet the needs of rural schools, families and students.

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